

Tutorial: Written Composition

WHAT IS WRITTEN COMPOSITION?

Writing a composition is a complex activity that includes the mechanics of writing, including handwriting (or keyboarding, using an adaptive device, etc.), spelling, and the basics of language knowledge (i.e., word morphology, syntax, and vocabulary). In addition it includes the following cognitive, meta-cognitive, self-regulatory, and motivational aspects:

- generating ideas to put into print
- planning what to say and how to say it
- organizing the ideas into a coherent whole
- recognizing the needs of readers and how to meet those needs
- translating these plans into a written text, including a style of writing and word choice appropriate to the writing task and projected readers
- remembering all of the components that need to be included in producing the composition
- self-monitoring the process and reviewing the content, organization, and mechanics and then editing as needed
- possessing the cognitive capacity to deal with all of these aspects of complexity
- possessing the confidence, motivation, and perseverance to engage in the hard work needed to create a well written product

Written composition also includes all of the processes related to reading comprehension. **(See Tutorial on Reading Comprehension)** Reading comprehension includes a large number of linguistic, cognitive, strategic/self-regulatory, and motivational processes involved in deriving meaning from written language (including books and other forms of written language) and constructing meaning from written language. Problems in any of these areas may contribute to writing difficulties.

Because of the complexity of its demands, writing is considered by many students with and without disability to be their most challenging academic task. College and university professors often comment on the inadequate writing proficiency of their undergraduate and even graduate students. Therefore it is no surprise that writing is among the major concerns for students with learning and other cognitive and language disabilities.

WHY IS WRITTEN COMPOSITION IMPORTANT FOR MANY STUDENTS AFTER TBI?

The writing of students with learning problems, regardless of their cause, tends to be short, comprising a list of topic ideas versus a coherent and effectively elaborated discussion. The writing tends to be done with little or no planning and with little or no monitoring, evaluating, revising, and editing. Students with learning problems tend to have difficulty sustaining the effort needed to write well, a problem that is worsened if the student has difficulty with writing mechanics (e.g., handwriting, spelling). Generally these students produce more output when allowed to dictate their assignment rather than write it.

If the student with TBI was competent with writing mechanics (e.g., hand writing and spelling) before the injury, it is likely that this competence will return. However, the characteristic problems encountered after TBI may make the other writing problems listed above even worse. For example, associated with frontal lobe injury are the following difficulties that negatively affect writing: difficulty generating ideas; difficulty planning and organizing a multi-faceted task; reduced insight into the needs of others, including the readers of one's writing; reduced space in working memory, thereby making it difficult to hold in mind all of the components of a writing task; reduced self-awareness of impairments and inefficient self-monitoring, thereby reducing the likelihood of reviewing, revising, and editing; and reduced perseverance. **(See Tutorials on Organization, Memory, Attention, Egocentrism, Self-Awareness)**

Students who are injured in the early grades when writing skills are being developed may be seriously impaired in all of the skills that go into proficient writing, including writing mechanics.

Specifically related to the executive function/self-regulatory aspects of writing (associated with frontal lobe injury), students with TBI may not:

- understand the nature of their difficulties **(See Tutorial on Self-Awareness.)**
- know that there are special procedures (strategies) that help them to succeed in difficult writing tasks **(See Tutorial on Cognitive and Learning Strategies.)**
- use the procedures and supports available to them as they plan their writing and then execute the writing plan
- consider their writing from the perspective of the reader **(See Tutorial on Egocentrism.)**
- monitor their successes and failures **(See Tutorial on Self-Monitoring.)**
- persevere in planning, executing, and monitoring their writing
- attribute their successes and failures correctly to their own effort
- take responsibility for doing what they need to do to succeed with their writing

For all of these reasons, writing (written composition) tends to be a serious difficulty for students with TBI.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN FEATURES OF INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT THAT ARE IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS WITH WRITTEN COMPOSITION PROBLEMS AFTER TBI?

Understanding the Problem

As always, step one in helping students with complex disability is understanding the problem. For example, difficulty with written composition could be a consequence of weakness in any of the domains (outlined above) that contribute to successful writing. In addition, the student might have difficulty with writing because of attention problems, poor orientation to task, behavioral resistance, discouragement as a result of a history of failure with writing, or other underlying problem. The problem exploration steps on this web site should help staff and family identify the factors associated with the student's writing difficulties. Intervention can then be targeted to the set of problems known to contribute to the student's difficulty with writing.

Environmental Compensations

Students with writing problems should receive some combination of the intervention strategies outlined below (under "Improving Writing") to improve their writing. However, there are also environmental compensatory procedures that might be useful while also implementing intervention strategies.

- Dictation: Students with relatively superior oral composition skills can dictate their compositions to another person or into a tape recorder. Their dictation can then be written (by the student or others), with coached revising and editing to follow. Alternatively the student can use software designed to transcribe dictation into a written product (e.g., Dragon Naturally Speaking). This option has the advantage of potentially facilitating the student's independence, but may require considerable effort to gain facility with the software.
- Models: Models of finished products can be shown to the students so that they know what their composition should generally look like when it is finished.
- Time lines, checklists, editing "cheat sheets": Students with and without disability tend to benefit from time lines for their writing, a checklist of components to include in the writing, and an editing "cheat sheet" that highlights likely editing needs and how to edit.

- Graphic Organizers: Teachers can show students a graphic organizer (e.g., a series of boxes and connecting arrows) that illustrates the content and the organization for a piece of writing. **(See Tutorial on Advance Organizers.)**
- Oral Advance Organizer: Many students with difficulty generating and organizing ideas for written composition benefit from pre-writing of points made during a conversation in which the teacher (or parent) asks questions that prompt thinking and organizing. These questions would include: "What topic would you like to/are you supposed to write about?" "What do you know about that topic... make a list." "What do you have to find out... make a list." "What would be important to say first to introduce your topic... write that down." "After the introduction, what would be important to say next?" "Let's think of something really interesting to say about this" and so on.
- Collaborative Writing: Collaborative writing is a component of the instructional program described in the next section. But it could also be considered an environmental compensation. Using this approach, students with significant writing problems who are unlikely to produce anything resembling effective written compositions may work collaboratively for an extended period of time with teachers and parents as they work to master basic skills and strategies related to writing. With this approach, there will be meaningful written products during an extended period of basic skill development, thus facilitating motivation to write.

Improving Students' Writing: Process and Product

The goals of a comprehensive writing program designed to improve written composition, elementary school through high school, include the following

- to improve the written products, including mechanics (handwriting, spelling, grammar), elaboration of topics, organization of topics, word choice, and general style of writing
- to improve the students' planful, strategic manner of writing
- to increase the students' knowledge of writing as a process
- to improve all executive function/self-regulatory aspects of writing, including self-awareness, goal setting, planning and organizing, self-instructing, self-monitoring, self-correcting, and self-reinforcing
- to enhance motivation and improve perseverance – and in general to improve self-concept as a writer

Therefore writing instruction should be organized within a broadly focused instructional approach that teaches mechanics, writing strategies, self-regulation of strategies and of the writing process, and correct attribution of success and failure. The instructional process should also explicitly address motivation and self-concept as a writer.

It is known that the writing of students with learning problems improves when the "self-regulatory" aspects of writing are "scaffolded", that is cued and supported by the teacher or parent. For example, when students are given a selection of evaluation statements about their writing (e.g., "This paragraph is complete and says everything I want to say") and a selection of revising statements to apply to their writing (e.g., "I need to say this more clearly; I need to say more."), their writing improves. Furthermore, programs of intervention designed to teach writing strategies and self-regulation through the writing process have been shown to be very successful for a variety of students with learning, cognitive, emotional, and other disabilities.

The writing instructional program with the most substantial body of research support is called "Self-Regulated Strategy Development" (SRSD, Steve Graham and Karen Harris). The approach has been shown to be effective with students from grade two through high school. It has been effectively used with regular education students, at risk students, and students with environmentally challenged backgrounds, learning disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and emotional and behavioral problems. Because the approach has this extensive evidence base and is consistent with the needs of many students with TBI, it will be used to structure this section of the tutorial on instructional strategies. SRSD is sometimes

integrated within – and supplements – the Writer’s Workshop, a popular approach to writing in the schools. SRSD has also been used in other instructional domains, including reading and mathematics.

SRSD has five interacting goal areas, which are integrated in the instructional process:

- Improve written products (behavior)
- Improve planful/strategic manner of composition (cognition)
- Increase knowledge about writing and the writing process (meta-cognition)
- Improve all aspects of self-regulation related to writing (e.g., self-assessment, goal setting, self-instructing, self-monitoring, self-reinforcing, managing the environment)
- Enhance motivation and sense of self as a writer (affect)

Consistent with the **Tutorial on Executive Function/Self-Regulation Routines**, self-regulation goals are integrated throughout the instructional process. This process of instruction avoids isolated skills training, decontextualized learning of sub skills, or passive learning of any sort. In contrast, students are engaged at every stage and there is meaningful writing at every stage, while at the same time explicit instruction of strategies and other processes is provided.

Stages in SRSD instruction for written composition:

Stage 1: Develop background knowledge and skills. For example, in order to write a good story, the student may need to learn the components of a typical story. At this stage, the self-regulatory component of goal setting might be introduced.

Stage 2: Explicitly teach and discuss the strategy. At this stage, a specific writing strategy is taught, for example SPACE for story writing: S: setting (characters, place and time); P: purpose (what starts the action?); A: action (how does the action unfold?); C: conclusion (how does the story end? how is the action resolved?); E: emotions (how do the main characters feel about the events of the story?) At this stage, the self-regulatory components of self-instructing and self-monitoring might be introduced.

Stage 3: Model the process of strategic writing: At this stage, the teacher demonstrates for the student how the strategies work in producing a good product. The teacher also models and reinforces goal setting, self-instructing, and self-monitoring.

Stage 4: Memorize the strategy mnemonics: The strategy must be practiced until it is memorized.

Stage 5: Engage in supported collaborative practice: At this stage the teacher and student practice writing together and jointly use their strategies and self-regulatory scripts (now including self-reinforcing), with the teacher fading support for both as it becomes possible to do so.

Stage 6: Demonstrate independent performance: Strategy procedures and self-regulation scripts are reinforced, and the student is encouraged to fade their explicit use as they become automatic.

Composition Aspects of Writing

To improve the length, organization, and completeness of the student’s writing, composition strategies are taught. Some of these strategies relate to the general process of writing, others to the components and organization of specific genres of writing (e.g., narrative versus persuasive writing). For example, within the SRSD instructional process, there are two possible shorthand strategies for the general process of writing. Students are encouraged to memorize the abbreviations.

POW

P: Pick a topic to write about.

O: Organize possible ideas into a plan.

W: Write and keep planning.

THINK – PLAN – WRITE

Think: Who will read it? Why am I writing?

Plan: What will I say?

Write: Write and say more!!

Strategies for specific genres (or types) of writing include the following:

For narrative (story) writing: **WWW What 2 How 2**

W; Who are the main characters?

W; When does the story take place?

W; Where does the story take place?

What; What do the characters want to do?

What: What happens when they try to do it?

How: How does the story end?

How: How do the main characters feel?

Also for narrative (story) writing: **SPACE**

S: Setting: characters place and time

P: Purpose: What starts the action? What is the problem or issue that leads to the action?

A: Action: How does the action unfold?

C: Conclusion: How does the story end; how is the action resolved?

E: Emotions: How do the main characters feel about the events of the story?

For persuasive essays: **TREE**

For young writers

T: Tell what you believe (State your topic sentence)

R: Give two or more reasons (Why do I believe this?)

E: End it (Wrap it up right)

E: Examine it (Do I have all of my parts)

For older writers, **TREE** shifts to:

T: Tell what you believe (State your topic sentence)

R: Give two or more reasons (Why do I believe this?)

E: Explain the reasons

E: End it

For students who are concrete in their thinking, graphic organizers (e.g., boxes connected in a certain order) can be added to illustrate visually the components of a genre of writing and how those components relate to each other. Please see the **Tutorial on Advance Organizers** for details about graphic organizers.

Self-Regulatory Aspects of Writing

As outlined earlier, facilitating the self-regulatory dimensions of writing is embedded throughout the instructional process. SRSD assumes that good writing not only requires the use of effective writing strategies (and good mechanics), but also requires mature self-regulation throughout the process of writing. These self-regulatory processes include:

- **Self-Awareness:** To succeed with writing, students need to know that writing is difficult for them and, specifically, what their weak areas are so that they can compensate effectively.
- **Goal Setting:** To succeed with writing, students need to know what they are trying to accomplish with their writing, who the audience is, and what the audience needs.
- **Planning and Organizing:** Written compositions are complex products with many components. To succeed, students need to know how to plan and organize their writing process.
- **Self-Instructing:** To succeed with writing, students need strategies, but also need to acquire a habit of instructing themselves to use their strategies.
- **Self-Monitoring:** To succeed with writing, students need to pay attention to the process and notice when they are missing a component or making mistakes.
- **Self-Correcting:** To succeed with writing, students need to edit their work for mechanics (handwriting, spelling, grammar), elaboration, organization, and style.
- **Self-Reinforcing:** To develop a positive sense of self as a writer and to maintain motivation, students need to reward themselves when they complete aspects of their writing and especially when they receive positive feedback from teachers.

See the **Tutorial on Executive Function/Self-Regulatory Routines** for more information on self-regulation.

Motivational Aspects

Writing is hard for most students. Even professional writers freely admit that writing is hard. Students with learning and information processing problems, including those with TBI, have particular difficulty with writing and easily become discouraged. This leads to resistance with writing and, in turn, to written products that are short and inadequate in many ways. Writing is complex and time consuming, thus requiring high levels of motivation and perseverance.

How is this motivation achieved? **(See Tutorial on Motivation)** Stages 3 and 5 of the SRSD instructional process outlined above emphasize a collaborative approach to writing. Teachers and parents can model the writing process and then work collaboratively with the students before they are expected to produce a good piece of writing independently. This collaboration ensures that frustration is minimized and that the student experiences at least a modest level of success, one of the keystones of motivation.

In addition, students are explicitly taught writing strategies that, if followed, guarantee that the written product will include the necessary components in their correct order. This additional support also contributes to success and a feeling of accomplishment. Furthermore, students are encouraged to work together in pairs or groups of writers, thereby adding to the contributors to success as well as the motivation that (often) comes with group work.

Like most good instruction, SRSD is criterion based rather than time based; that is, the students don't move on until they achieve adequate mastery of each step in the instructional process. And the students are encouraged to monitor and reinforce themselves as they proceed successfully through the steps of writing. The students' writing should also be shared with others so that there is the feeling of accomplishment associated with completing a project that has a purpose and good outcome.

Motivation is enhanced when some of the writing assignments have a larger purpose, for example letters to congressman about issues in which the students take an interest. Teachers and parents should model enthusiasm as they write with the student (e.g., "We did it! This sounds terrific! I feel great when I'm able to say what I want to say and say it clearly!").

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